Development, governance and contested power relations : the case of Central American forestry programmes

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Development, Governance and Contested Power Relations:
The Case of Central American Forestry Programmes

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Introduction

Within the last three decades, dozens of programmes devoted to community forest management, participatory forestry, and decentralized forest governance have been implemented in different parts of the global South. Following the frustration with the capability of governmental-driven, top-down development models to promote sustainable forestry and enhance local livelihoods, many of the international aid agencies and multilateral development institutions have fostered community-based development projects, with emphasis on democratic forest governance, participatory forestry, increased aid efficiency, and the appropriation of the projects by the targeted local beneficiaries (Lemos and Agrawal 2006, Platteau and Gaspart 2003, Smoke 2003, Ribot 2003).

In theory, participatory forest management can increase democratization of forest governance by allowing local populations to make decisions on the control and use of forest resources. With participatory forest management, local people may also feel a greater sense of ownership of rules for resource use and be more engaged in their implementation, monitoring and enforcement. Participatory forest management may also contribute to the more equitable distribution of benefits and provide mechanisms for marginalized groups to gain influence on forest management. On the other hand, participatory projects may be subject to political pressure and bribery, or they may be captured by political elites, who promote hierarchical relations instead of democratic participation and political accountability (Blaikie 2006, Nygren 2005, Pacheco 2004, Ribot 2009, Zulu 2008).

Achieving the goals of participatory forest management is, in fact, a complicated and organizationally challenging task. Successful participatory forestry requires reconciliation of diverse and often contradictory interests of multiple actors and multiple institutions operating at different social scales (Blaikie 2006, Cleaver 2002, Nygren 2005, Nygren and Myatt-Hirvonen 2009, Wilshusen 2009). In this article, we analyze the opportunities and constraints faced by the Finnish Forest Development Programme in Central America (PROCAFOR), which aimed to promote good governance and improve local livelihoods through participatory forest management approaches in Central America, in 1992-2003. Our analysis will focus on Nicaragua and Honduras, the two major partner countries within the Finnish-funded PROCAFOR programme. These two countries have the largest productive forest

resources in Central America and some of the highest rates of poverty and income inequality in Latin America (CEPAL 2004).

During our analysis, we will consider the impacts of a development programme in line with Long's (1992: 35) conceptualization of any development intervention as "an ongoing, socially constructed and negotiated process, not simple the execution of an already-specified plan of action with expected outcomes". Based on this formulation, we are interested not just in the aimed missions and direct effects of the PROCAFOR, but on the wider-scale socio-economic processes and political power relations under which this programme was executed and which had a significant impact on the programme's intended and unintended, anticipated and unforeseen consequences (Lewis et al. 2003, Mosse 2006). By examining the implementation of the PROCAFOR programme from the perspective of multiple actors and multiple interests, we aim to show that the involvement of different resource-users and different institutions in socially responsible forest management is a much more complicated task than generally considered. Special attention will be paid to the networks of power through which the strategic "gatekeepers" – sometimes also called "brokers" – were able to capture many of the critical resources targeted for community development.

Bastiaensen et al. (2005: 983) identify gatekeepers as actors who are "able to manipulate and exploit outside intervention as well as local expectations on their own behalf". More broadly, Olivier de Sardan (2005: 137-138) defines development interventions as multifaceted arenas of struggle where diverse actors, with their differing interests, logic of decision-making and degrees of political power, interact and confront each other. Taking these approaches as our starting point, we conceptualize gatekeepers as occupiers of crucial "nodes" between different economic activities and political relationships in various arenas of control and power (Bebbington et al. 2008, Wilshusen 2009).

The dilemma why just a part of the development resources targeted for local populations tend to reach their final destination is a pivotal question in all the studies related to the impacts of development aid and the distribution of the targeted benefits. As shown in Figure 1a, the gatekeepers, with their expanded social ties and institutional networks, often utilize a part of the resources targeted for community development for their own purposes (Bastiaensen et al. 2005, Platteau 2004). As illustrated in Figure 1b, there may be a "hole" in the networks between the donors, governmental authorities or buyers of the local products and the local inhabitants; a hole through which a considerable part of the resources targeted for local population, or of the value of the products supplied by local producers for markets,

is captured by the gatekeepers. As further demonstrated in Figure 1c, at worst this exit works in the way that the portion captured by the gatekeepers becomes a "dominant" way of distributing the benefits, while the portion achieved by local people becomes only a "deviation".

In such a situation different kinds of resources, such as money, equipment, contacts, and information, flow through the gatekeepers, who control the "gates" in many different directions, manoeuvring the relations between donors, governmental authorities, non-state and private-sector actors, and the targeted local populations. As will be shown during our analysis, it was especially these mechanisms of gatekeeping and their links to different forest and agricultural-oriented value chains (Mendoza 2000, Mendoza and Bastiaensen 2003), which PROCAFOR did not take sufficiently into account during the implementation of its participatory forest projects.

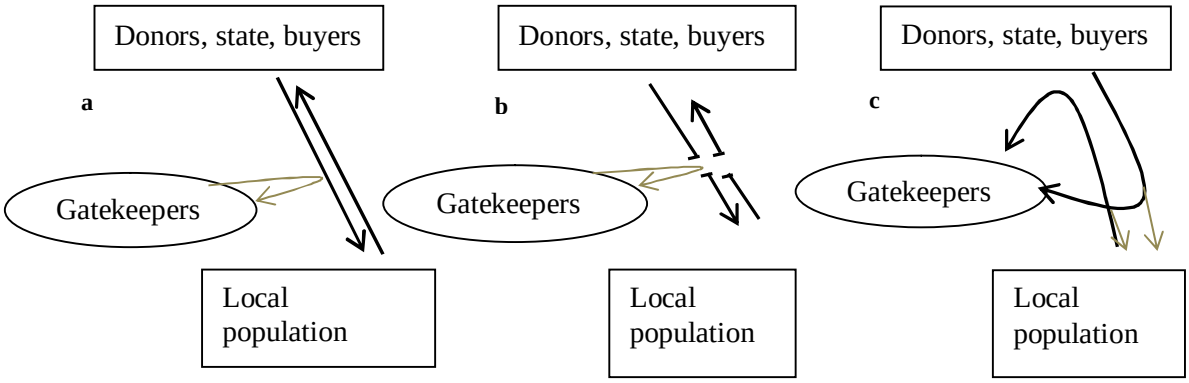


Figure 1. The typical form of operation by gatekeepers

The next section of this article explains the general context of the PROCAFOR programme and the methods used in this research. The third section analyzes the intended and unintended processes that shaped the impacts of the PROCAFOR in the case study areas, paying special attention to local livelihoods, participatory processes, mechanisms of gatekeeping, and forest value chains. The final section presents the main conclusions of the research and provides some policy implications relevant in the context of participatory forest development programmes in the global South.

Context

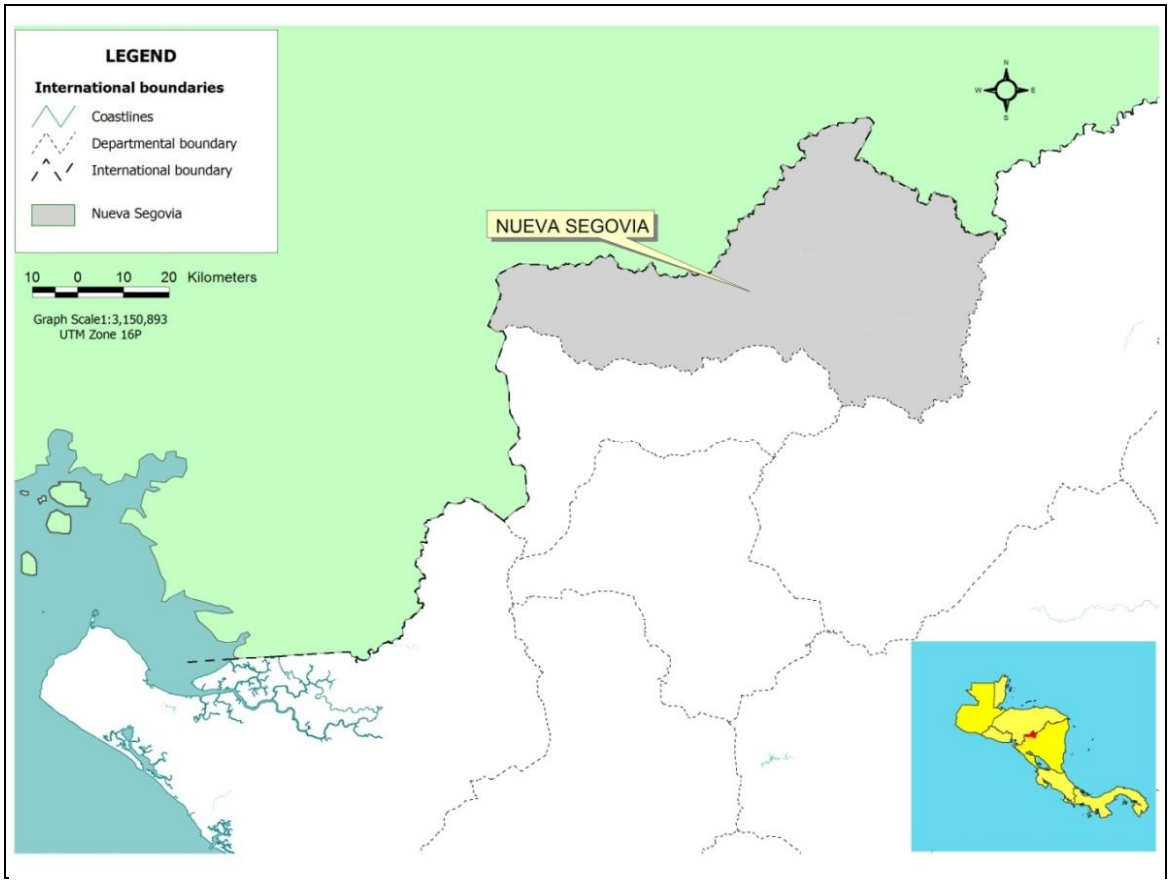
Central American countries have about 23 million hectares of productive forests, which

represent 44% of the Central American total forest area (FAO, 2005). Honduras and Nicaragua have the largest forest resources in Central America. In Honduras, the 4.6 million has of forests represent about 42% of the country's land area, and in Nicaragua, the 5.2 million ha of forests represent about 43% of total land area. About 88% of the Honduran territory and 79% of the Nicaraguan territory is considered appropriate for forestry (FAO 2005, Nygren et al. 2006).

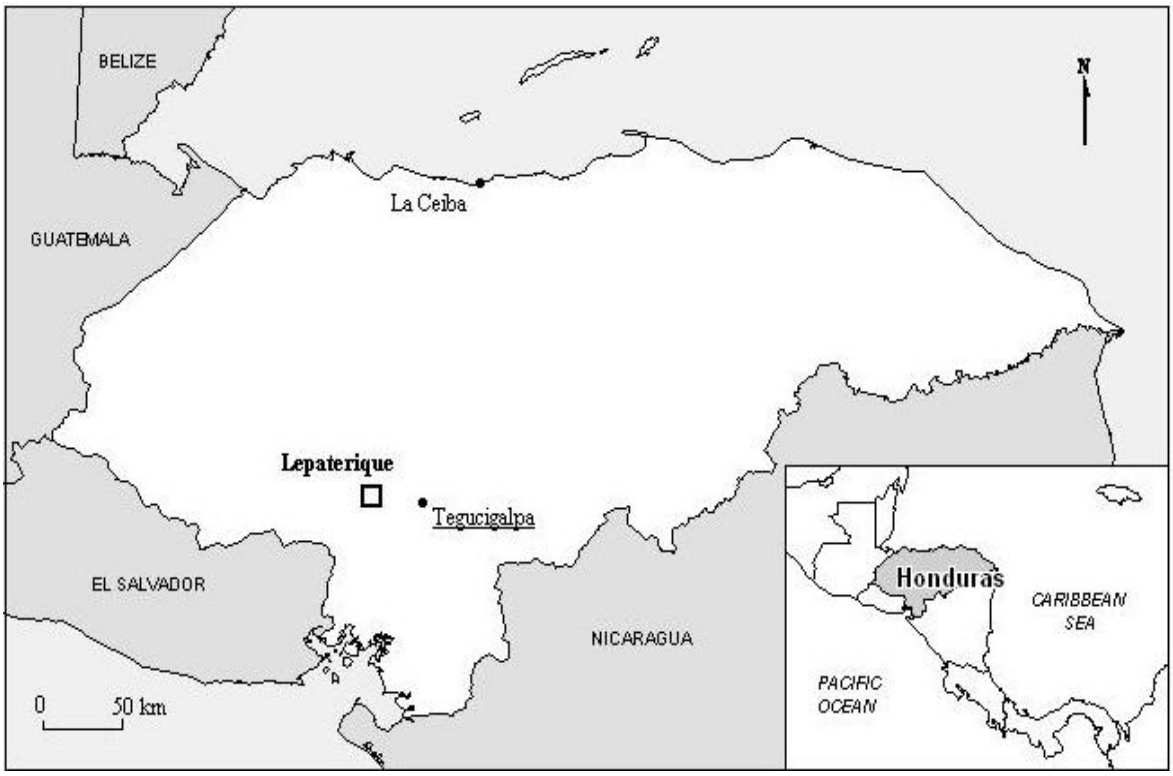
Pine (coniferous) forests are the most important forest resources from the forest-economic point of view in both countries. In Nicaragua, coniferous forests form around 18% of the total forest area (Romero 2008: 15), while in Honduras, pine forests count about 49% of the total forest area (FAO 2005, Vallejo 2003). In Nicaragua, about 35% of the exported forest products are pine-coniferous, while in Honduras, about 97% of all the commercial wood production is pine-coniferous (Nygren 2005). The main markets for forest-based products in both countries are other Central American countries, the Caribbean region, and the USA. Together, Nicaragua and Honduras represent 48% of the forest products exports in Central America. However, the forest industry's contribution to GDP is only about 4% in both countries (Guevara 2004, Vallejo 2003).

This study covers Dipilto, Jalapa, Mozonte and San Fernando municipalities in the Department of Nueva Segovia in Nicaragua (Map 1), and Lepaterique municipality in the Department of Francisco Morazán, in Honduras (Map 2). The dominant timber tree species in both sites is pine-coniferous. Both areas have a complicated system of land and forest tenure, with pluralistic forms of land ownership and customary resource rights. Concerning forest resources, there are municipal (ejidal), communal and individual land titles, combined with state-owned forests, customary resource rights, private concessions for timber production and non-timber forest product extraction, as well as areas designated for strict protection.

This diversity of land and forest tenure arrangements is further complicated by the diversity of actors and institutions involved in the governance of access and control over forest resources. In Lepaterique, local inhabitants have traditional usufruct rights to individual parcels under their management on the ejidal lands, legally owned by the municipality (Nygren 2005, Roquas 2002). In Nueva Segovia, all the above mentioned property systems are found; in addition, the indigenous authorities are making increasing claims for a revised recognition of the indigenous customary rights to communal lands. The population is ethnically diverse in both study sites, consisting Lenca-Indians and mestizo-ladinos in Lepaterique, and different groups of Indians, such as Cujes, Yaras, Guaques, and Nahualts, with heterogeneous sectors of mestizo-ladinos in Nueva Segovia.



Map 1. The Area of Nueva Segovia in Nicaragua



Map 2. The Area of Lepaterique in Honduras

Both countries have a complicated history of forest exploitation. In the Nicaraguan Segovia, pine forests were heavily exploited by Spaniard rulers before the Central American independence, as they needed tar and wood for ship building. Large-scale timber exploitation by transnational forest companies was common especially between the 1950s and 1970s; the logging was organized through forest concessions granted by governmental authorities and the timber was mainly sold to US markets. Since the 1990s, the forestry business has been largely carried out by Salvadorian, Honduran, and US forest companies, who dominate especially the phases of wood exportation, wholesaling, and retailing (Mendoza 2002). Since the 1990s, some of the local cooperatives started to participate in upgraded forest business with higher value processed timber products with the support of international development cooperation, including PROCAFOR. Because of the difficulties to upgrade their technical capacities for efficient wood processing, these cooperatives, however, soon turned to supply unprocessed round-wood. Some indigenous groups participating in commercial forest business also received considerable criticism from their own indigenous authorities, who under the influence of the international environmental NGOs supporting them, considered indigenous people as "intrinsic forest stewards" (Mendoza 2004).

In Honduras, large timber companies dominated the forestry sector until the 1970s,

carrying out extensive cut-and-run loggings through concessions granted by the government (Suazo et al. 1997). In Lepaterique, three sawmill operators who dominated the national timber markets divided the concession rights to the area's forest resources between themselves. These companies organized virtually all aspects of forestry, from logging to commercialization, and although the municipality received some timber revenues, it was reduced to a subordinate role in the forestry sector. These arrangements also undermined the local residents' resource rights and minimized their role in forest management (Nygren 2005). In the 1970s, all the forest resources were declared state ownership and the governmental institute, the Honduran Corporation for Forestry Development (COHDEFOR), was established to take care of their management. Since 1992 the municipal government of Lepaterique has taken care of the responsibilities of forest management on municipally owned lands (Vallejo 2003).

The Finnish-funded forestry programme, PROCAFOR, started to operate in 1992. According to the PROCAFOR's mission statement, there was a great potential for forest development with active participation of small forest owners and resource-users, in Central America. One of the key issues in PROCAFOR was the Simplified Forest Management Plan that was planned to be implemented, according the Finnish forestry experience, in the Central American coniferous forests, under the management of small forest owners and community forestry operators. PROCAFOR's aim was to improve the ability of local forest communities and municipal forest authorities to manage forest resources in an environmentally sustainable, economically viable, and socially just way, by engaging local communities as active partners in the planning and implementation of forest management. Through projects of decentralized forest governance and community forest development, the programme proposed to integrate the goals of environmental conservation and poverty alleviation in a sustainable way (PROCAFOR 2001a, 2001b).

This study is based on multiple methods, including qualitative and quantitative data collection from both primary and secondary data over a period of 2003-2009. Thematic interviews, based on semi-structured and open-ended questions, were carried out with local inhabitants, community representatives, and community-based organizations in both study sites. Dozens of interviews were also carried out with the PROCAFOR's staff, project leaders, municipal and state forest authorities, non-governmental organizations, and relevant research institutions. These data were complemented and crosschecked by participant observations at municipal meetings, people's daily production activities, and informal social gatherings. Focus group discussions and thematic workshops were held with different

subgroups of local inhabitants, representatives of central and municipal governments, local cooperatives, and regional producer associations. Informal conversations with forest authorities and forest experts in both study sites were valuable to crosscheck the data. In addition, a high number of PROCAFOR's development documents, monitoring reports and evaluation documents were subjected to a qualitative content analysis.

Impacts in local environments and local livelihoods

When analyzing the livelihood strategies in Nueva Segovia and in Lepaterique, a complex picture of multifaceted strategies, with complicated links to heterogeneous economic portfolios and related value chains, was revealed. In Nueva Segovia, extensive cattle raising was practiced on the lowlands at 200-500 meters above the sea level mainly by large landowners who contracted smallholders for field preparation and animal care through traditional systems of sharecropping. At higher altitudes, peasant smallholders and middle and large-sized landowners produced coffee for global markets. Many smallholders also practiced food cropping, mixed gardening, and small animal husbandry, combined with forest activities, such as timber harvesting, charcoal production, and handicrafts made of pine needles. Large landowners were usually situated closer to roads and markets while smallholders lived in more remote areas (Ruiz and Marin 2005).

The same diversity of livelihoods strategies held true in Lepaterique where most of the households earned their livelihood through a variety of sporadic economic activities, including food cropping, mixed gardening, coffee cultivation, small-scale animal husbandry, resin tapping, firewood and charcoal production, and timber harvesting. A group of women also produced handicrafts made of pine needles for sale in the capital city of Tegucigalpa. Resin tapping and firewood production had been practiced in Lepaterique for decades. In this respect, PROCAFOR's main aim was to enhance the resin tappers' and firewood producers' technical and organizational capacities for environmentally sound, economically efficient and socially inclusive production systems. Concerning the timber harvesting, PROCAFOR had a crucial role in encouraging local inhabitants to establish community-based forest enterprises engaged in commercial logging (Nygren 2005).

At the end of the PROCAFOR programme, forestry constituted one of the cornerstones in Lepaterique livelihoods, particularly in the communities with organized forestry groups. In 2003, Lepaterique was responsible for 30% of the pine resin, 8% of the firewood and 55% of the charcoal produced in Honduras (AFE-COHDEFOR 2003). The PROCAFOR-promoted timber harvesting, in particular, considerably improved the standard

of living of those households engaged in logging. According to a socio-economic survey carried out in Lepaterique, forest activities contributed 20-30% of the total income of local households in 1992. By 1997, the income of those households participating in logging had doubled, and the proportion of income they received from forest activities had increased to 50-60% of their total income. In 2003, the salary of a logger was twice the daily salary of an agricultural worker (Nygren et al. 2006). In each interview, local loggers emphasized that whenever they get logging permits, their economic situation improves. This optimism was also reflected in the names people had given to their community-based forest enterprises, including *Unión y Esfuerzo* (Union and Effort), *Nuevos Horizontes* (New Horizons), *Nuevo Amanecer* (New Dawn), and *Buena Suerte* (Good Luck). At the municipal level, the revenues from the forestry sector increased steadily since the early 1990s and represented in 2003 about 66% of the municipal budget. Increased forest revenues gave the opportunity for the municipal government to participate in socially beneficial development projects, such as improvement of public water, school, and health care services.

As most of the households in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique had usufruct rights to less than ten hectares of land, most of them were, however, obliged to supplement their agricultural and forestry incomes by engaging in various non-farm activities, such as casual wage work, informal trading, and migration work. In the early 2000s, about 49% of the total income received by rural households in Nicaragua came from the non-agricultural sector; the share of the non-agricultural income was the highest among the smallholders (Bastiaensen et al. 2005, Deininger et al. 2003). People were also increasingly migrating to urban areas and abroad for temporary wage work. In the mid-2000s, about 30% of the migrants to Costa Rica came from the interior of Nicaragua, including Nueva Segovia (Baumeister et al. 2008). A similar situation held true in Honduras, where the remittances sent from the migrant workers from the USA represented 21% of the country's GDP in 2005 (Nygren and Myatt-Hirvonen 2009).

One of the weaknesses in the PROCAFOR programme was the scarce attention paid to the diversity and interconnectivity of people's livelihood strategies. In PROCAFOR's official vision, small forest operators were supposed to rely exclusively on forestry for their livelihoods, with limited recognition that most of the households both in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique depended on an array of sporadic but mutually interdependent economic activities. Instead of trying to increase the benefits from forestry as a single livelihood activity, a framework that had better considered the role of forestry within a wider framework of people's economic activities could have provided a more appropriate approach for

economically, socially and environmentally sustainable community forestry in countries such as Nicaragua and Honduras.

From the environmental point of view, the forests of Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique were better managed during the PROCAFOR programme than during the timber companies' cut-and-rung logging. In both regions, PROCAFOR carried out intensive training courses and workshops on environmentally improved methods of timber and non-timber forest extraction. The tasks of forest conservation and improvement of local livelihoods were, however, difficult to combine in areas such as Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique, where forest areas were fragmented and there was not enough forest resources left to enable a major part of the population to participate actively in commercial forestry. In both regions, it was especially the uncertainty of resource rights that decreased the forest extractors' motivation to invest in labour-intensive activities of forest conservation. Most of the low-income smallholders in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique made their economic decisions according to what would provide livelihood at the moment, instead of what might yield higher profits in the long-term. This affected also their decisions whether to invest in time-demanding forest conservation practices.

Another weakness within the PROCAFOR programme was the conventional view of local communities as units of homogeneous households with common goals and shared norms of resource use. Although PROCAFOR improved the local people's participation in forest management, relatively little attention was, in fact, paid to the competing claims of different actors to forest resources. In recent years, an increasing number of studies of rural livelihoods have emphasized the heterogeneity of local communities and their diverse ways of perceiving and using natural resources (e.g. Bebbington et al. 2008, Kay 2006, Nygren 2005, Paulson and Gezon 2005, Sunderlin et al. 2005). When mapping the everyday politics of resource access and control in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique, a complex picture of multiple actors emerged with diverse and often conflicting resource-use priorities. The residents in study sites were socially differentiated in terms of access to land, size and quality of resources under their management, degree of participation in different income-generating activities, age, gender, ethnicity, social position, and political power. These differences also influenced their access to forest resources and their views of forest management. In Lepaterique, for example, when resin tappers saw a forest as an ideal place for non-timber forest extraction, loggers were interested in timber cutting, while farmers were attracted to forest clearing for agriculture, considering a standing forest as a wasteland to be "improved" through land clearing.

These differences also provoked a variety of resource conflicts. While resin tappers were highly motivated to protect the forests against fires in order to secure their living, firewood and charcoal producers occasionally started forest fires to obtain a permit to

produce firewood or charcoal. Correspondingly, when loggers argued that the resin tapping provides only survival income, while by participating in logging, people can considerably improve their living standard, resin tappers pointed out as a counterargument, that while resin tapping has offered a supplemental income for most of the Lepaterique households for decades, the social distribution of the benefits of logging has often been unequal. Conflictive views of forests were common also along gender lines. Women had limited access to forestry in Lepaterique because most of the usufruct rights were registered in the name of the husband, and the commercialization of firewood, charcoal and timber was considered a male task. Based on these issues, women argued for increased participation in resin tapping and the intensification of tree cultivation as part of the home gardening.

A similar mixture of actors and institutions, with competing claims to forest resources, held true in Nueva Segovia. Leaders of local indigenous organizations, encouraged by international nature conservation organizations, supported projects of forest protection in Nueva Segovia, financed by development aid. Forest companies, instead, championed intensive timber exploitation, backed by many of the governmental forest officials. A forest was seen as an industrial raw material and a source of capital by forest companies, as biodiversity by international nature conservation organizations, as a life-sphere by indigenous people, and as a way to complement sporadic income through occasional timber sales by non-indigenous smallholders. Some of the local landholders also dreamed of converting their forest parcels to coffee fields. When local timber producers tried to scale up their logging activities toward first-degree processing, the governmental support for such community-based wood processing initiatives was low. Taken into account all this heterogeneity, it would have been important for PROCAFOR to formulate a more diversified framework for forest development, where the multiplicity of actors and their conflicting interests had been better considered in order to promote more transparent forest management and more equal distribution of forest-related benefits.

Impacts in Participatory Processes

One of the key ideas in the PROCAFOR programme was to promote forest conservation and poverty alleviation through community-based forest management approaches, based on participatory methods. This mission, however, changed over time according to the transformations of global discourses and policies related to community forest management. During the first phase (1992-1996), PROCAFOR emphasized the idea that, if peasants had access to appropriate technology, self-managed rotation funds, and governmental support for

community forestry, through active involvement in commercial forestry, they could significantly improve their economic life conditions. During the second (1996-1998) and third phases (1999-2003), PROCAFOR began to support more enterprise-oriented forest cooperatives, more formal mechanisms of microfinance, and more institutionalized projects of forest development, where community-based forest cooperatives would be closely linked to private forest businesses and national producer associations (Benitez and Leppänen 1997, PROCAFOR 2001a).

Correspondingly, the facilitating role of PROCAFOR was originally based on the idea that southern partners should be the owners of their development projects. Over time, PROCAFOR leaders, however, began to perform a much more proactive role than initially envisioned. Most of the PROCAFOR regional project coordinators and their staff members came from governmental or NGO sectors and they typically interpreted their role as administrative and operational. If the international advisers ordered something to be done, the regional director-administers interpreted that task from an executing point of view, whereas the local technicians further reinterpreted these ideas from their own, loyalty-gratitude perspective. Within this context, local people as "final beneficiaries" were easily placed in the role of "active participants", however without significant opportunities to define the terms of their participation.

Compared to the period of concession logging by outside timber companies, when local people had no access to commercial timber production and little voice in decision-making related to forestry, the participatory forest management promoted by PROCAFOR meant a big step forward in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique. Participatory approaches enhanced the organizational capabilities of local institutions to manage forest resources, and the decisions concerning forest governance were brought closer to local resource-users. Training on participatory approaches also encouraged local people to challenge the hierarchical forms of authority and to address the problems of unequal access to resources more openly. In stakeholder meetings and participatory workshops organized by PROCAFOR, local residents were actively pressuring the municipal authorities and community representatives to defend local resource rights and to improve the local control over expanded economic opportunities related to forestry. The conflicts over forest resources were made more transparent and the previously invisible local actors, such as women and landless poor, were given better opportunities to voice their resource claims.

The general rules of forest governance, such as approval of forest management plans and monitoring of their implementation were, nevertheless, under the control of central

government even during the PROCAFOR programme. Despite all the rhetoric of community forestry and participatory approaches, the political commitment of governmental institutions to community forest management remained low both in Nicaragua and Honduras. As the governmental posts were highly politicized and changed every four years, forest regulations were exceedingly volatile. Although PROCAFOR promoted a significant reform by establishing new schemes of the Simplified Forest Management Plan for community forestry operations; in general, the approval of forest management plans took a long time, and the monitoring of forest management was characterized by excessive regulations, many of which were not easily adaptable to the conditions of community forestry.

Concerning local-level participation, the question of who represents local people and who is allowed to make decisions over the use of local resources was scarcely problematized within the participatory model utilized by PROCAFOR. Similar to many other development projects in Nicaragua and Honduras, PROCAFOR utilized community leaders as "authentic" sources of authority to reach local population and to influence on public opinion. The issue of whether these leaders were legitimate representatives of local people was rarely discussed. Some of these leaders were highly responsible and acted in accordance with the needs of local residents; others were authoritarian and unscrupulously engaged in political intriguing (Nygren 2005). A common problem both in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique was that the local representatives were often selected from a small circle of self-appointed candidates who lacked broad support and credibility among the local inhabitants. In Lepaterique, for example, the strongest opponents of the establishment of a local charcoal association were some community leaders who themselves acted as charcoal intermediaries and who thus counteracted the efforts of charcoal producers to organize themselves. As Ribot (2009) has pertinently pointed out, the significance of any act of local empowerment largely depends on what is being devolved, to whom, and under which conditions.

Officially, there were hundreds of beneficiaries within the PROCAFOR programme both in Nicaragua and Honduras, ranging from local forest users and forest-dependent communities to governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, indigenous associations, forest cooperatives, private forest enterprises, and forestry-related colleges and training centres. In a situation where peasant economies were largely considered as separate from commercial forestry, PROCAFOR made a remarkable effort in officially recognizing the capabilities of small peasants and indigenous groups for sustainable forest development. At the institutional level, PROCAFOR emphasized the importance of establishing community-based forest cooperatives, engaged not only in the timber and non-timber forest

extraction, but also in the processing of value-added forest products, such as furniture. In gender issues, PROCAFOR had a crucial role in the promotion of organized women groups, engaged in forest-based handicraft production and marketing. Many of these PROCAFOR-promoted community forest groups and cooperatives were able to establish strategic networks and webs of cooperation to relevant governmental, non-governmental and private sectors, critical for the improvement of their livelihoods.

At the same time certain questions can be raised concerning the mechanisms through which the local community forestry operators were encouraged to embark on northern organizational models and industrial business strategies within the PROCAFOR programme. Although the idea of producing for markets was not unfamiliar for Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique smallholders, the ways in which these small forest producers were pressured to intensify their market connections required a complex interplay of different logics and different forms of decision-making that did not automatically coincide with each other. Commercial timber production for global markets requires long-term investments and business strategies, whereas low-income community forestry operators often make their production decisions according to what they can afford at the moment and what works according to the local social norms and cultural practices (Nygren and Myatt-Hirvonen 2009). In the traditional forest operations in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique, the economic actions were usually pursued through informal channels where considerable attention was devoted to personalized networks, social norms, and political relations of trust. In this respect, more sensitivity would have been needed in PROCAFOR to make sure that these southern community forestry operators were not urged upon the production systems and business models that required exceedingly different form of logic and different strategies of doing business than characteristic of local cultural practices and prevailing socio-political conditions.

Impacts in political power relations and mechanisms of gatekeeping

A fundamental problem hindering the long-term democratization of forest governance in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique concerned the issue that after being elected to their positions, municipal authorities and community representatives often began to engage in political intriguing. They disengaged themselves from the local residents and began to negotiate trade-offs with higher-level authorities, prosperous timber merchants, and prominent political bosses. Such trade-offs often included arrangements through which part of the development resources targeted for community development was captured by economic and political

gatekeepers, who often acted also as intermediaries manipulating the local people's access to commercial markets. Despite widespread objections by local residents, municipal authorities in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique found it difficult to deny the requests of the powerful gatekeepers, whom they often needed to advance their own political agendas. Some of these gatekeepers were scheming political bosses who issued commands from the shadows and manipulated affairs through dummy agents and invisible ties to power. An official who did not comply with the demands of such a boss faced a serious risk of being ousted from his post or otherwise intimidated (Nygren 2005).

The practices of illegal logging were closely interwoven in such procedures of gatekeeping. According to Richards et al. (2003), about 40-45% of timber from Nicaraguan pine forests and 30-50% of timber from Honduran pine forests was extracted illegally in the late 1990s. A whole array of extra-legal mechanisms thus shaped the realities of forest management in both countries. Some authorities who were responsible for controlling illegal logging were part of the business, which diminished the credibility of the patrols and made the rules hypocritical in the eyes of the public. Persons within the authorities' inner circles – relatives, political allies and economic bosses – used networks of friendship and patronage to get permits to extract forest products in quantities in excess of the quotas or in areas not allowed by the forest management plan. From the perspective of the more marginal sectors of the population, the strict restrictions on forest extraction represented an unjust way of controlling forest use in a situation where powerful forest operators avoided prosecution for violations of the law by engaging in political manipulation and bribery. In a certain sense, illegal logging formed an institutionalized political-economic system, forged from governmental authority and moulded around everyday power relations. Although everybody knew who was extracting illegally and where, illegal operators were rarely prosecuted because an official denouncement of an illegal operator placed the informant in a high risk of retaliation.

Especially in Nueva Segovia, the most powerful gatekeepers were active in several businesses related to wood, livestock and coffee production, as well as in urban-based activities, such as operation of supermarkets, hardware stores or gas stations. Concerning the forestry business, these gatekeepers had "invisible" ties to community-level leaders and political bosses, local timber intermediaries, governmental forest officials, urban sawmill operators, and even to global furniture retailers. Through these networks they were trying to manoeuvre the local people's relationships to forest markets. Some of the gatekeepers were also engaged in the business where legally logged timber was mixed with the illegal one,

although these double practices were strategically concealed beyond the discourse of "community forest management". When an international development aid agency wanted to promote forest conservation, the gatekeepers were ready to agree with this agenda; when other agencies wanted to improve forest exploitation, they were ready to deal with this business; when international evaluators wanted to verify what is happening in the field, they had a web of assistants to convince that everything is carried out in an accountable way. Over time, even a microcredit institution, through which several development cooperation programmes, including PROCAFOR, channelled their micro-credits for local residents in Nueva Segovia went to the control of some gatekeepers. This despite the fact that the institution was officially kept under the status of a "non-profit" civic organization.

In the area of Mozonte in Nueva Segovia, an especially strong web of gatekeepers was consolidated during the PROCAFOR programme. In practice, three gatekeeper families invisibly governed the municipality: One of them controlled the local church institution, another one controlled the municipal government, and the third one controlled the indigenous organization. No matter of their accusations of each other in some occasions, there was a strong "social corridor" between these three families. Various international development programmes, including PROCAFOR, supported the Mozonte indigenous organization in the 1990s and early 2000s, considering it as an excellent case to enhance indigenous capacity-building. After the mid-2000s, it was suddenly revealed that the family controlling the indigenous organization had captured a significant part of the development aid targeted for community development, while at the same time practicing illegal logging from local community forests. Due to limited external control, a significant part of the funds targeted for the organizational strengthening of the indigenous association ended up to support this single gatekeeper family. The global environment-development discourse's popular metaphors of nature conservation, indigenous rights and local participation were strategically repeated by all the three gatekeeper families to conceal the existing strategies of gatekeeping.

In Lepaterique, the PROCAFOR-promoted participatory forestry yielded considerable changes in the conventional hierarchies of political authority, especially during the first and second phases of the programme. Although local political bosses and outside timber merchants did not lose their privileges, they were nevertheless under increasing pressure to acknowledge the need to negotiate with local resource-users over resource access. In view of the local residents' growing criticism of corruption and illegal timber trade, the forest authorities could no longer take the systems of political patronage and favouritism for granted. Instead, they had to carefully weigh the advantages of receiving economic and

political favours from influential economic and political bosses against the social and political costs of increasing opposition by local people. This situation drastically changed during the final phase of the PROCAFOR programme, when the municipal authorities began - contrary to the agreement with PROCAFOR - to grant logging permits to individual timber contractors instead of community forestry groups. In 2004, most of the logging operations were carried out by nine individual contractors who were the local political-economic bosses. These contractors also negotiated a clandestine deal with the biggest sawmill operator in Honduras, according to which, the sawmill operator advanced money to the contractors, and the contractors were, in turn, obliged to sell their timber to this sawmill.

One of the major deficiencies in the PROCAFOR programme was precisely that relatively little attention was paid to the existing power structures and the embedded strategies of gatekeeping. In numerous interviews and discussions with different PROCAFOR project leaders, it became evident that most of the PROCAFOR advisers were well-informed of the existing practices of gatekeeping and political intriguing. However, most of them had limited opportunities, fortitude or willingness to try to significantly transform these politically delicate and highly influential power structures, with long roots in the Nicaraguan and Honduran social and political history.

Global Value Chains

Another big challenge faced by the PROCAFOR programme was the local producers' access to wider forest markets. In Nueva Segovia, most of the indigenous groups sold their trees to intermediaries without even harvesting them. This was partly because many of the indigenous leaders, encouraged by international conservation organizations, supported conservation approaches that easily categorized indigenous people as forest conservationists *per se*. This agenda was further strengthened by large timber companies who claimed that "indigenous people don't have the capacity for forest business". As a result, most of the local indigenous people focused on small-scale firewood production as the main strategy to get cash, carrying firewood by mules for sale in the nearby town. The peasant forest cooperatives in Nueva Segovia were, instead, actively engaged in logging. However, their attempts to upgrade their logging activities toward wood processing with the help of PROCAFOR, resulted in limited success. Most of them failed because of the cooperatives' limited infrastructure for high-quality processing, combined with the practices of gatekeeping.

Corresponding problems emerged in Lepaterique. In Honduras, an oligopolistic market structure, dominated by three resin companies that purchased the raw resin at a fixed

price, limited the earnings of resin extractors in Lepaterique, as well as in other resin-producing areas. In addition, Honduran resin processors faced stiff competition in increasingly globalizing markets, especially from China, the world's largest producer of resin (FECHAFOR 2003). In the case of timber, a local sawmill company, *Industria Maderera Lepaterique S.A.* (INDUMALSA), was established in Lepaterique with the support of PROCAFOR, in 1997. The purpose of this limited company, with 450 local shareholders, was to add economic value to local products by processing roundwood into boards, planks, and posts. Owing to bad administration and a rapid decline in wood prices, the company had to cease its operations in 2001 with a debt of 2 million lempiras. The PROCAFOR-promoted furniture workshop met the same fate. The failure of these efforts generated much resentment among the local residents, especially because the investment in the shares of INDUMALSA had been marketed by some business consultants as an investment in "green gold".

When analyzing the Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique producers' position within the wider forest value chains, a relatively skewed picture of the distribution of benefits emerged. The prevalent timber and non-timber forest value chains were based on hierarchical power relationships and subject to high inequality in income and profit distribution. Local loggers, and firewood and charcoal producers reaped only a small portion of the benefits, while more substantial profits accrued to wood intermediaries, urban sawmill operators and furniture processors. In Lepaterique, for example, a charcoal intermediary earned 6.1 times as much as a charcoal producer, and a firewood intermediary earned 16.2 times as much as a firewood producer, per working day in 2004. In addition, the work input of a charcoal intermediary was 30% less than that of a charcoal producer and that of a firewood intermediary 80% less than that of a firewood producer (Nygren et al. 2006). Even if the financial risks borne in unpredictable markets were taken into account, the profit margin gained by intermediaries was inequitably high. Concerning the timber production, even the most influential local timber contractors had to rely on urban sawmill operators as a source of advance payments, which gave the latter considerable leverage in setting the terms of trade.

In respect to global forest value chains, the timber produced in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique was largely sold to big sawmill operators that dominated the national wood markets and also exported some wood abroad. However, it was difficult for the Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique producers to get involved in vertically integrated forest value chains, which required economies of scale, standards of quality, and reliability of delivery far above the capacities of these small, low-intensive producers (Kaplinsky et al. 2002, Taylor 2005). These forest value chains were largely driven by big multinational retailers who

sourced from hundreds of suppliers throughout the world; while some of the more specific value chains were governed by medium-sized buyers, specialized in high-quality, value-added forest products (Figure 2).

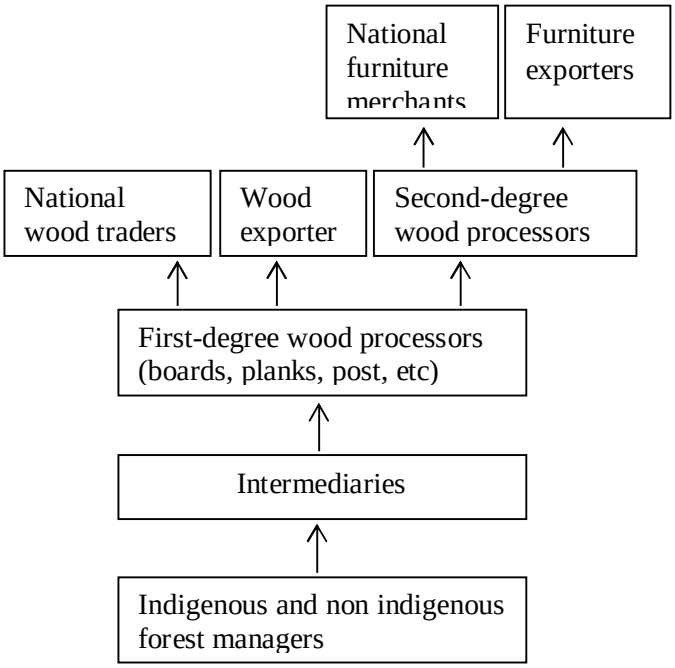


Figure 2. The dominant wood-furniture chain relevant in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique

Nicaraguan and Honduran wood and furniture processors were mainly supplying commodity-grade pine wood, subject to unstable price formations, to conventional wood markets in El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Barbados, and other Caribbean islands. Some more specific companies were exporting small amounts of furniture to certain niche markets in the USA and Costa Rica. Even in these cases, the design, value-adding degrees of processing, and marketing – aspects that form the virtues of the global value chains – were largely controlled by US and El Salvadorian enterprises (Romero 2008).

These issues clearly indicate that the sustainability of community-based forestry is critically dependent on wider forest value chains, which in the case of Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique were based on a host of intermediaries and hierarchical power relations that prevented the local community forest operators' successful incorporation into the national and global wood and furniture markets. Based on these facts, it would have been crucial for PROCAFOR to shift increasing attention to the political-economic processes that mediated these forest producers' incorporation into globalizing forest markets and to the institutional

mechanisms that mediated the rules and requisites of the overall wood production and trade. Community forest operators in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique, with limited experience of global forest markets, and with scarce resources to significantly intensify their timber production, had limited opportunities to guarantee the volume, uniform quality and time delivery that industrial-level timber and furniture buyers demanded. Poor infrastructure, competition with illegal loggers, and weak bargaining power further constrained the opportunities of these community forestry groups to gain a profitable market niche in the prevailing forest value chains. At best, PROCAFOR could have promoted new kinds of partnerships between these southern community forestry operators and some special furniture companies, interested in strengthening their reputation as environmentally and socially responsible suppliers of tropical forest-based products.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed the impacts of the PROCAFOR forest development programme in relation to local livelihoods, participatory processes, structures of gatekeeping and forest value chains, by drawing on case studies of Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique, in Nicaragua and Honduras. When analyzing the intended and unintended impacts of the PROCAFOR programme, considerable attention needs to be focused on the role played by different actors, with their multifaceted interests and values, in shaping the rights, rules, and responsibilities of community forest development in the study sites.Although the PROCAFOR's mission statements noted the multiplicity of the targeted beneficiaries within the programme's areas of implementation, more attention would have needed in the PROCAFOR to fully recognize the existing economic and socio-cultural heterogeneity within and between the targeted rural communities, with their complex land-use histories, heterogeneous forest-users and multifaceted interests toward forest resources. Concerning the PROCAFOR's efforts in improving the local livelihoods, a framework that had better considered the role of forestry within a wider framework of livelihood strategies could have provided a more appropriate approach for economically, socially and environmentally sustainable community forest management in countries such as Nicaragua and Honduras. For example, an elaboration of a more integrated forest management plan, including both timber and non-timber forest products, could have helped the forest authorities to better recognize the ways different forest activities complemented and competed with each other in the local livelihood strategies.

Compared to the period of concession logging, the PROCAFOR's participatory

forest management programme significantly improved the local resource-users role in the allocation of forest resources and strengthened their influence on forest governance. The earnings of the local residents engaged in timber harvesting likewise increased. Nevertheless, the continuing inability or unwillingness of governmental authorities to be accountable to the local population, together with capricious forest policies, eroded to a certain degree the legitimacy of the participatory forest management and inclusionary forest governance, promoted by PROCAFOR.

The opportunities for socially more transparent control of forest resources were strongly mediated by the existing hierarchies of power and strategies of gatekeeping, both in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique. The PROCAFOR project leaders were well-informed and highly conscious of these hierarchies, however, most of them had limited opportunities or fortitude to try to significantly transform these politically delicate and highly influential power structures. In this respect, it would have been important to better ensure that the institutions regulating the local forest use included legitimate representation of different segments of the local population (Pacheco 2004). Given the tendency of municipal authorities to circumvent the rules, more effective mechanisms to guarantee that the commitments made in the agreements are implemented in practice would have needed. Credible law enforcement mechanisms had been crucial to prevent illegal logging, while establishment of more secure usufruct rights for local resource-users could have helped to prevent outsiders from gaining unfair access to local forest resources.

Furthermore, participatory forest management as such seems to be a weak policy instrument for sustainable community forestry, if the wider political-economic factors that structure the local producers' access to forest markets remain stratified (Ribot 2009). According to our analysis, sincere aims existed in PROCAFOR to consider the special conditions under which the small forest producers in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique operated. Nevertheless, more efforts would have needed to ensure improved market access and increased prices for these small and low-intensity forest operators in relation to globalizing forest value chains. Strengthening of local producer associations' collaborative networks with similar groups elsewhere could have increased the associations' capacity to develop their operations, improve the quality of their products, and increase their influence on forest policies. As our study has indicated, the sustainability of community forest development programmes largely depends on how well the interlinked goals of forest conservation, improvement of local livelihoods, and formulation of economically viable and socially inclusive forest development strategies can be achieved at the long term.

Development of socially transparent and politically accountable institutions at different levels of society is essential to ensure democratic forest governance and socially just forest management.

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COMMENTS

By

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In general the study is well structured and its conclusions valid. However, I want to comment on two out of the four main themes of the article, namely the livelihoods and the gatekeeping. As they are rather new concepts in the development discussion, I want refer to the context of the past Millennium, when Central American Forestry Programme (PROCAFOR) was implemented.

PROCAFOR was started in early 1990´s after changes in the legislation in Honduras and Nicaragua finally permitted private forest owners to enjoy the benefits of trees that were on their land. Until then the common (though not necessarily entirely correct) interpretation of prevailing forest legislation was that trees in natural forests were a property of the state even if the land belonged to a private person or to a community. The land owners´ right was limited to collecting some non-timber forest products (like resin) and fire wood for domestic use. The development objective of PROCAFOR was ´to integrate forestry activities in peasants´ economy in economically and environmentally sustainable manner´ (PROCAFOR 2003, p. 10). This development objective remained the same throughout the 12 year life span of PROCAFOR. Therefore, it is not fair to say that ´in PROCAFOR´s official vision, small forest operators were supposed to rely exclusively on forestry for their livelihoods, with limited recognition that most of the households both in Nueva Segovia and Lepaterique depended on an array of sporadic but mutually interdependent economic activities´ (p. 10).

Departing of the idea of respecting local and indigenous knowledge, the working hypothesis for PROCAFOR was that the land owners already knew the processes of producing agricultural products on their farms as well as collection of the forest products that were earlier permitted. Therefore PROCAFOR concentrated in what the peasants were not supposed to know, i.e. in timber harvesting and silvicultural works. For this reason it may be claimed that PROCAFOR did not consider the economy of local peasants as holistically as it should have had, but concentrated in the income generation through timber harvesting activities.

The need for modification in legislation was evident as forests were swiftly disappearing and replaced by other crops, like coffee and maize, which were indisputably property of the land owner. As the control mechanism was based solely on check points at

road side, trees were safe to be cut as long as they were not transported. People were also very clever in finding ways how to avoid the check points whenever they wanted to sell the logs. With the emission of the Law of Modernization of Agricultural Sector (No. 31 of 1992) in Honduras and the Forestry Degree (No. 45 of 1993) in Nicaragua the situation was drastically changed and the ownership of trees was given to the land owner. It is clear that these changes of legislation were not welcomed by all. The same applied to PROCAFOR as a program to assist the two governments in implementation of the laws and raising the awareness of forest owners for example concerning the value of their forests. In general terms the implementation of new legislation left much less opportunities for the opportunists in forestry sector.

In theory all land owners should have been content with the change. However, the option to sell their logs illegally remained attractive as it provided higher profits with much less bureaucracy. For forest industries the implication of the new legislation in short run was an increase of costs of raw material. For government officials the new laws and their implementation meant extra work. The independent forestry professionals could have benefitted from the change as it gave them a lot of working opportunities in preparing the mandatory forest management plans and annual work plans. It is evident, however, that among these independent foresters there were also individuals who had greater interests in stage than their own work inputs.

The gatekeepers came from all these groups and according to my estimate at the early days of PROCAFOR the majority wanted to keep the gates closed rather than open them. It is true that the problem of gatekeepers was not studied in detail. The report rightly says (p. 16): ´Although everybody knew who was extracting illegally and where, illegal operators were rarely prosecuted because an official denouncement of illegal operator placed the informant in a high risk of retaliation.´ In fact, in past Millennium the corruption in forestry sector was a taboo that could not be mentioned in official connections and therefore it was very difficult topic to be studied.

In early 2001 I interviewed personally 58 high ranking Central American forestry professionals representing the state forestry organizations, associations of private or communal forest owners as well as independent professionals. One of the themes discussed in these semi-structured interviews was control mechanism exercised by the state forestry authorities. Although the interviewees were guaranteed full anonymity, not a single of them took up the matter of illegal logging and I had to conclude (Leppänen 2003, p.163): ´In this study it is important what is said and how it is said. But it is also important what is not said.

That is why it is surprising that none of the 58 interviewees makes no reference whatsoever to illegal timber in the Central American market.´

At that time it was estimated that the illegal timber contributed to approximately 35 % of the total volume harvested in Costa Rica (Campos et al 2001). There were no studies available of the corresponding figures in Honduras or Nicaragua, but they could be estimated to be higher. A more recent study (Richards et al 2003) revealed that the corresponding percentage in Nicaragua was 40 – 45 % and in Honduras 30 – 50 % (pine forests only).

Many of the documents referred here were presented in the Central American Forestry Congress in Panama in 2003. In the Congress, the illegal logging and other forms of forestry related corruption were quite openly discussed. Personally I consider this as the first step to combat forestry related corruption in Central America. After all, a problem cannot be solved unless it is clearly recognized.

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